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ABSTRACT

To find out what kinds of information parents regularly get from schools on the progress of their children, the Southwest Regional Laboratory surveyed a sample of public school districts in California, Arizona, and Nevada. Responses were received from 18 school districts ranging in size from fewer than 300 students to more than half a million. The information received indicates that school districts rely heavily on the traditional report card as their primary tool for student/parent communication, unless the student has special problems or the parents choose to take advantage of scheduled conferences. Results of the inquiry are arranged according to three different types of parent report: regular report cards, other types of reporting, and parent-teacher conferences. Under the section on report cards, a breakdown is provided of evaluation formats (letter grades, numeric marks, and threefold designations), and social development/growth or citizenship evaluation marks. Other types of reporting include results of statewide or districtwide standardized tests and reports of pupil progress. Parent-teacher conferences range from formal and regularly scheduled events based on specified topics to informal, random visits. Finally, the uses of special letters or communications are briefly noted. (TE)

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# HOW PARENTS FIND OUT ABOUT STUDENT PROGRESS

Jannine Perkins and Aaron Buchanan

## ABSTRACT

What kind of information do parents regularly get from schools on the progress of their children? To find out what data schools are sending home, SWRL surveyed a sample of public school districts in California, Arizona, and Nevada. All districts rely heavily on the traditional report card as their primary tool for school/parent communication. Other types of reporting, used by some but not all districts, include results from district testing programs and indefinite information provided in parent-teacher conferences.

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## HOW PARENTS FIND OUT ABOUT STUDENT PROGRESS

Jannine Perkins and Aaron Buchanan

By anyone's appraisal, parental support is important to student progress in school, especially where students are falling behind the pace of regular instruction and the school is implementing programs to help them catch up. But how do parents find out about student achievement, and how specific is the information they see concerning student acomplishments and the skills where they still need additional work? Schools traditionally use two methods to communicate routinely with parents on their children's work. One is the parent-teacher conference held one or two times during the year. The second is printed information that schools send home to parents, sometimes in conjunction with the regular parent-teacher conference, but most often at the end of each quarter of the school year whether conferences are scheduled or not. For decades, the most common way to communicate with parents has been the all-purpose report card where students are graded on a four or five point scale in several broad areas of subject matter. But, these days, schools tend to have a great deal of information that is more precise in defining what students have accomplished and where improvements are most needed. Do parents become involved with this kind of information? Or do they still deal mostly with letter grades on things like reading, mathematics, science, and so on?

To find out more about the practices that schools use in reporting to parents, SWRL staff conducted a survey of several school districts in the Laboratory's region--Arizona, Southern California, and Clark County

(Las Vegas), Nevada. In April and May of 1981, letters were sent out to administrators most directly responsible for testing and parent reporting programs in approximately 50 school districts--25 each in Southern California and Arizona and the single county school district that serves the Las Vegas area. School districts were chosen to represent a fairly broad range in size so that we could find out about parent reporting practices in some large, urban school systems, some suburban districts, and some smaller rural schools. The administrator we contacted in each district had been identified for us earlier through a telephone call to the superintendent or a high-ranking assistant or supervisor. In the letter, we asked for samples of the kinds of reports sent home to parents, the schedule for reporting to parents on student achievement, and the frequency and purpose of parent-teacher conferences. We were mainly interested in reporting practices used with parents of regular students. We did not ask about practices involving parents of handicapped students because the law here stipulates extensive school-parent interaction that goes well beyond reporting practices that are used with regular students. Also, parents of handicapped students are more likely to initiate their own inquiries about their child's program and progress. Nevertheless, we did receive a lot of fairly detailed information from school districts concerning the practices they used to comply with laws and regulations governing handicapped students.

Overall, we received information from 18 school districts: 9 from Southern California, 7 from Arizona, and 1 from Nevada. We also received information from a private school in the Las Vegas area. Nine districts

ranged in size from 224 to 9,861 students, and nine ranged from about 16,000 students to more than a half million. The information sent to us indicates that the traditional report card is the main working tool that school districts have for reporting to parents about their children's progress in school. There are exceptions, of course, but by and large the report card conveys the information parents receive, unless the student has special problems or the parents choose to take advantage of scheduled conferences.

In the pages that follow, results of the inquiry are arranged according to three different types of parent report: regular report cards, other types of reporting including formal reports on scores from district-wide or state-wide tests, and fairly informal information given out in parent-teacher conferences.

1. REPORT CARDS

All districts report that a formal report card is sent home to parents on a regular basis. Most of these cards (in 14 of the 16 reporting districts) are developed at the district level. District personnel involved in developing these cards include administrators, education specialists, research and evaluation specialists, teachers and parents. In several districts, prototype cards have actually been tried out and revised on the basis of teacher/parent/school needs and likes/dislikes. Two of the districts allow individual schools to develop their own report cards, but these cards must be approved by the Board of Education. The school-developed cards did not appear very different from cards we received from other districts that were developed at the district level.

About two-thirds of the districts use more than one type of report card across grade levels 1-6 (see Table 1).

Table 1

Number of Different Card Formats

| | 1 card | 2 cards | 3 cards |
|---|---|---|---|
| Number of Districts | 5 | 10 | 1 |

The one district which uses three cards has different ones for grades 1-2, grades 3-4, and grades 5-6. Ten districts that use two cards are evenly divided in the way they separate grade levels (see Table 2).

Table 2

Grade Level Separation for Two Report Cards

| | 1-2 and 3-6 | 1-3 and 4-6 |
|---|---|---|
| Number of Districts | 5 | 5 |

The major difference between report cards used for lower grade levels (1-2 or 1-3) and those used for higher grades (3-6 or 4-6) is the type of mark used to represent pupils' academic achievements. In general, lower-grade-level report cards carry such marks as O, S, N, U (outstanding, satisfactory, needs improvement, unsatisfactory) while upper-grade-level report cards carry more familiar marks such as A, B, C. D, F.

Most of the districts (13) send cards home to parents four times during a school year. Two districts send cards home three times a year, while one district sends cards home twice. Parents are asked to sign and return all report cards except the one for the final reporting period. Report cards are often cumulative across the school year, and an original is typically kept in the student's personal file. About half of the districts (7) indicated that their first report card is given to parents during the parent/teacher conference heid in the fall of each school year.

The content of report cards is remarkably consistent across districts. In all sixteen districts, report cards have three distinct reporting areas. The first area is "academic achievement" (or

something similar). This area contains marks that report on the pupil's achievement in various academic subjects, most often reading, mathematics, language (or oral and written expression), spelling, social studies or social science, science, P.E., art, music, etc. Half (8) of the district cards give one evaluation mark to each subject area, while the other half (8) give marks for one or more sub-areas such as: (1) reads well orally; (2) reads with understanding; and (3) applies acquired skills to new words. In approximately two-thirds of the districts, marks for academic achievement are accompanied by an "effort" score. Thus, each subject area has one mark that represents the pupil's academic achievement and another mark that represents the extent of effort expended by the pupil on work related to the subject area.

The second area found on all sixteen district report cards is labeled "social development," or "social growth" (or something similar). This area frequently contains sub-areas such as: (1) listens to and follows directions; (2) finishes work on time; (3) keeps own materials in order; (4) is dependable; (5) assumes responsibility for actions; (6) works and plays well with other students; (7) respects rights and property of others; (8) is courteous; and (9) obeys school rules.

The third area contains a report on the number of days that the pupil has been present, absent, or tardy. Most cards also contain spaces for teacher and/or parent comments, as necessary.

Academic Achievement Evaluation Marks

The type of grade or mark given for academic achievement does vary across districts and across grade levels within districts. Table 3 below

shows the breakdown of marks in terms of the size of the point scale used.

Table 3

Size of Point Scale Used to Represent Academic Achievement

| | 6 | 5 | 4 | 3 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of Districts Using Scale at One or More Grade Levels | 1 | 14 | 6 | 7 |

As one can see from Table 3, many districts use different point scales at different grade levels. (Ten districts used more than one scale.) The report cards for the lower grade levels use smaller point scales, often having three-points such as E = excellent, S = satisfactory, and N = not satisfactory. Cards for the upper grade levels use larger point scales with more differentiations, usually four- or five-points. (Only one district reported the use of + and - marks to shade evaluations between regular point scale marks.)

The specific type of mark used to represent academic achievement also varies. Three basic types of marks are used:

(1) the standard A, B, C, D, F

(2) numeric marks 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, or 4, 3, 2, 1

(3) special letter marks E, S, N or O, S, U

Table 4 shows the breakdown of districts using the various types of symbol systems.

Table 4

Specific Type of Evaluation Mark Used to Represent Academic Achievement

| | A-F Marks | Numeric Marks | Letter Marks |
|---|---|---|---|
| Number of Districts Using Marks at One or More Grade Levels | 10 | 6 | 9 |

The A, B, C, D, F marks are used most consistently. Three districts do not include the F mark, but two of these use an I (incomplete) or U (unsatisfactory) mark in its place.

Table 5 shows the types of numeric marks used by six districts. As one can see from the table, both the size and the direction of the scales varies.

Table 5

Type of Numeric Point Scale Used*

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 4 | 4 | 1 | 1 |
| | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 |
| | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 |
| | 1 | 1 | 4 | 4 |
| | 0 | | 5 | |
| Number of Districts Using Marks at One or More Grade Levels | 1 | 1 | 4 | 1 |

*Top number represents high point on the scale

Other letter marks used by districts do vary, but they are found most frequently on cards for the lower grade levels, evaluation of social development, and occasionally "effort" in academic subject areas. However, the variation across districts is related to the size of the scale (3- or 4-point scale) and the exact word used; the "intent" of the scales is extremely similar. Only two scales are used by more than one district. The Outstanding/Satisfactory/Needs improvement/ Unsatisfactory scale (O, S, N, U) is used in two districts. The Excellent/Satisfactory/Not satisfactory scale (E, S, N) is used in four districts. Other letter-based systems are listed below:

1. Excellent-Satisfactory-Improvement Needed (E, S, I)
2. Excellent-Good-Satisfactory-Unsatisfactory (E, G, S, U)
3. Satisfactory-Unsatisfactory-Needs Improvement (S, U, ✓ )
4. Satisfactory-Improvement Needed-Not Improving (S, I, N)
5. Outstanding-Very Good-Satisfactory-Needs Improvement (O, VG, S, N)
6. Most Objectives Mastered-Some Objectives Mastered-Not Many Objectives Mastered (M, S, N)
7. Most Skills Mastered-Working on Skills-Not Improving (M, +, N)

One additional piece of information about academic achievement is reported by fourteen of the districts. For reading and mathematics, a working grade level is reported which may be different from the pupil's assigned grade in school. This mark is supposed to indicate that the pupil is working above grade level, at grade level or below grade level.

Social Development/Growth, Citizenship Evaluation Marks

None of the district cards use the A, B, C, D, F or the numeric (1, 2, 3, 4, 5) marking systems for evaluating pupils' social growth.

Instead, other letter marks with 2, 3, or 4 different "values" are used as shown in Table 6.

Table 6

Size of Point Scale Used to Represent Social Development

| | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of Districts Using Scale at One or More Grade Levels | 1 | 4 | 13 | 2 |

By comparing the data in Table 6 with that in Table 3, it is evident that most districts use a 5-point scale to evaluate academic achievement, especially at the upper grade levels, and a 3-point scale to evaluate social development. Only three districts have different evaluation systems for upper and lower grade levels. The most common scale used is the excellent (or outstanding)-satisfactory-not satisfactory (or needs improvement) scale (E, S, N); this is used by nine districts. The Satisfactory-Unsatisfactory scale is used by two districts. The remaining systems are unique to a single district:

1. Commendable-Satisfactory-Needs Improvement (+, S, /)
2. Most of the time-Some of the time-Not much of the time (M, S, N)
3. Satisfactory-Needs Improvement-Improving-Unsatisfactory (S, N, I, U)
4. Satisfactory-Needs Improvement-Not Improving (S, I, N)
5. Outstanding-Very Good-Satisfactory-Needs Improvement (O, VG, S, N)

6. Outstanding-Satisfactory-Needs Improvement-Unsatisfactory (O, S, N, U)

7. Excellent-Outstanding-Satisfactory-Improving-Needs Improvement (E, O, S, I, N)

8. Excellent-Satisfactory-Improving-Needs Improvement (E, S, I, N)

9. Excellent-Satisfactory-Unsatisfactory (E, S, U)

While the exact terms used to describe the scales vary, the general intent and method for these marking systems are very similar.

Seven of the districts indicate that they send some other type of information home with the report card. In most cases, this is information that reflects the extent to which the student has mastered the district's grade-level objectives or competencies. The lists of objectives (competencies) that this information comes from will be discussed more fully in the next section of this report.

2. OTHER INFORMATION SENT HOME TO PARENTS

Districts often send home other kinds of information besides report cards. These fall into four general categories: (1) results of standardized tests; (2) reports of pupil progress on district- or state-level objectives or minimum competency requirements; (3) parent/teacher conferences; and (4) special letters or conversations with parents.

1. Standardized Tests

Thirteen of the districts reported on their use of standardized tests and the information that is sent home to parents.

Table 7

Standardized Test Used

| | Stanford Achievement Test (SAT) | California Achievement Test (CAT) | Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) | No Test Mentioned |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of Districts Using Test | 3 | 9 | 1 | 3 |

Seven of nine districts using the California Achievement Test (CAT) are from Arizona where there is a state-mandated program for "Continuous and Uniform Evaluation of Reading/Writing/Computation Skills." This program requires the use of the CAT along with some type of grade-by-grade system of required minimal competency skills.

Not all of the districts send standardized test results as such home to parents (although all of the Arizona schools do, by state mandate). Three districts distribute standardized test results only

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to teachers or district level evaluators. The data are used for one or more of the following purposes: (1) development of teacher-made lists of skills which an individual pupil needs to work on; (2) comparison of aggregated pupil results with levels of minimum competency established by the district; or (3) general comparison of district or school level results with national means.

The most common types of standardized-test data that are sent home to parents include: percentile rank of pupil, stanine level, and grade equivalent scores. Six districts send one or more of these types of information home. Two districts do not include grade equivalent scores on the parent/home report; and two districts send home only notification that the pupil is "above," "at," or "below" grade level, or that they are "proficient" or "non-proficient" in terms of grade-level expectations implicit in standardized test scores.

In most cases the report sent home to parents is a copy of information coming directly from the testing service. It is usually accompanied by some explanatory comments on how to interpret the results.

2. Reports of Pupil Progress

Twelve of the sixteen districts report that they have some type of district or state level system of basic or minimum skills required grade by grade. (This includes all seven schools reporting from Arizona.) These systems usually include a list of skills classified according to grade levels and a set of assessments used to determine points at which pupils are to be judged proficient on various skills. Table 8 shows how

the results of pupils' progress through a system of skills and assessments are reported.

Table 8

Reports of Pupil Progress on District/State-Mandated Competency Requirements

| | Results Sent Home | Results Reported in Parent/Teacher Conference | Results for Teacher Use Only |
|---|---|---|---|
| Number of Districts | *9 | 2 | 1 |

*Not all districts send reports at every grade level. Many districts evaluate proficiencies at three grade levels (e.g., 3rd, 6th, and 8th).

Most of the mandated competency assessment systems are concerned with reading, mathematics and writing. The systems are based on detailed lists of specific skills which are to be mastered at a specific grade level. Reports to parents indicate whether a specific skill has been mastered, is being worked on, or has yet to be introduced. Some districts include an end-of-year checklist which informs parents of the skills completed during the school year; usually, such reports are sent home along with the formal report cards.

3. Parent/Teacher Conferences

Not all of the districts report that parent/teacher conferences are scheduled on a regular basis. (In some cases, it is possible that districts overlooked the fact that we were interested in the conference as a parent-report medium when they returned the information we

requested.) Of the districts that did provide us with information on parent-teacher conferences, seven report that one regular parent/teacher conference is scheduled in the fall of each school year. Three districts have two regular parent/teacher conferences scheduled each year, one in the fall and one in the spring. Six districts report that parent/teacher conferences are scheduled only as needed--by teacher or parent request--or that no formal conferences are regularly scheduled. All districts that use parent/teacher conferences recommend additional conferences whenever the teacher or parent feels that there is a need for communication.

Most districts that schedule parent/teacher conferences make some recommendations about the types of information that should be made available to parents at that meeting. One district has a richly detailed list of questions for teachers to ask or to anticipate that they will have to answer. The district also provides some very explicit suggestions for what a "good answer" should be.

The following list includes examples of the types of information that a parent/teacher conference typically provides:

1. a list of student strengths, both academic and social
2. a list of student weaknesses, both academic and social
3. recommendations for corrective actions to alleviate weaknesses or difficulties or deficiencies
4. reports of various test results: standardized tests, district tests, teacher tests
5. reports of district or state level, ongoing minimal competency systems: discussion of skills and proficiency testing
6. discussion of any attendance problems

7. discussion of homework quality
8. a folder of student work samples
9. the actual report card, when it is given out at the first conference
10. discussion of possible student retainment at a particular grade level
11. discussion of health records, where they are a possible cause of student difficulties
12. presentation of any interesting or appropriate anecdotal observations
13. discussion of any needs or questions posed by the parents

4. Special Letters or Communications

Although most districts likely have special letters they send home to parents, only six letters of this type were returned to us. Five districts mentioned that warning letters are sent to students who may be retained at the present grade level. Parents are to sign and return the letter to school. Parent-teacher conferences are often scheduled at this time. (Several districts have a special area on the student report card where parents get formal warning of possible retention of their child at the end of the school year.) (One district also sends out a commendation notice to inform parents of superior performance by a pupil in a particular subject area or on a particular task.)

SUMMARY

Standard report cards have wide appeal for schools because they are easy to use and familiar to parents. Information from standardized achievement tests is easy enough for most districts to provide, but it is

often confusing and easy for parents to misinterpret. Information from local testing programs is easier to interpret, because it usually deals with skills and concepts that are more discrete than the two or three broad constructs that standardized tests report on in each area of subject matter. However, information from local programs is frequently too time consuming for teachers to provide unless local districts have some computer-based system for collecting and processing student data.

It is easy to talk about the desirability of parents becoming more responsible for interacting with teachers, helping their children at home, seeing to it that homework and other assigned tasks are completed on time, and generally becoming active partners in the education of their children. The information mechanisms for these aspirations, however, have not yet been provided to schools.